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ABSTRACT

This study followed up on the life-courses of 23 former special education students with emotional and behavioral disabilities from a comprehensive school to further education, work, and adulthood. The students attended special classes for pupils with emotional and behavioral difficulties in a small town in southern Finland in 1985-1987. The qualitative data were gathered in two biographical interviews in 1991 and 1995. The key finding was very positive: most of the interviewees were quite ordinary Finnish young people after 8 to 10 years of finishing their comprehensive schooling; only three still have serious problems in almost all of the important fields of adult life. However, as reported in earlier follow-up studies, the poor educational background is reflected in vocational level for these former special education pupils. Also the unemployment rate of this group has been higher than the average level in Finland. Four extreme cases of postschool life course are provided. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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TEN YEARS AFTER SPECIAL EDUCATION

EBD-students in transition to adulthood in Finland.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study (Jahnukainen 1997) was to follow-up the life-course of former special class students from the comprehensive school to the further education, work and adulthood. The basic questions were "How have these former maladjusted pupils managed after comprehensive school? Are they still somehow maladjusted as adults in Finnish society?"

The members of the study target group (n = 23) have finished the comprehensive school at special classes for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in a small town in southern Finland in 1985 - 1987. The qualitative data was gathered in two biographical interviews in years 1991 and 1995.

The key finding was very positive: most of the interviewees were quite ordinary Finnish young people after 8 to 10 years finishing their comprehensive schooling; only three have still serious problems in almost all of the important fields of adult life. However, as reported also in earlier follow-up studies, the poor educational status in vocational level is evident for these former special class pupils. Also the unemployment rate of this subgroup has been even more higher than in average level in Finland.

Four extreme cases of postschool lifecourse will be introduced.

Keywords: special education, school maladjustment, follow-up study, life-course, emotional and behavioural difficulties, transition, further education, employment

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METHOD

Purpose

The study (Jahnukainen 1997) had two aims: 1) to follow-up the lives of former special class pupils from comprehensive school to further education, work and adulthood; and 2) to search for the meaning of such special class treatment from the perspective of former pupils' experiences and life-courses. In this article I will concentrate on the results of the first objective. The crucial question is, are the former school maladjusted pupils also maladjusted adults.

Participants

The members of the target group have completed their comprehensive schooling as members of special classes for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in a small town in southern Finland between 1985 and 1987. Successful contact was made with 23 former special class students (18 male and 5 female). This represents nearly 90 percent of the original target group. This is important because there exist the greatest risk of drop-out for the most vulnerable people in follow-up studies (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Further, the gender distribution is typical of special classes for disturbed students – whereby male are over represented. The reasons for special education placement have been typical behavioural problems (e.g. Moberg, 1985; Apter & Conoley, 1984): disruptive behaviour, concentration difficulties, truancy, learning difficulties, etc.

Data Collection

The qualitative data was gathered in two in-depth interviews in 1991 and 1995. In the first part of the study in 1991, fifteen former pupils (12 male and 3 female) were contacted. At this time the subjects ranged from 20 to 24 years old. During the second interview in 1995, 23 subjects (18 male and 5 female) were contacted, the oldest one was then 28 years old. The interviewees' median age in 1995 was 25.5 years.

RESULTS

Five groups of postschool adjustment

Winners

The group named "winners" consists of three male subjects, who are all from the oldest age group. They all have long working careers behind them, S9 have never been unemployed and the other two only for short periods of time just after finishing school and at the worst time of economical depression. In 1995 they all were working in upper white collar occupations and clearly have better salaries than other subjects.

"Winners" have all participated in some kind of vocational education, however only the subject S9 finished vocational school. He also has gotten night school diploma in marketing. Also their social lives have been successful; they have all had a long-term cohabiting relationship and they said that they have had always a good relationship with their mothers. Then again the relationship to their fathers has been problematic for all of them.

Ordinary Citizens 1 & 2

The group named "ordinary citizens" has been split into two subgroups. The members of the upper group, ordinary citizens I ("on the surface") had quite stable life situations in 1995. They have all obtained some kind of vocational qualification and have been working most of the time in occupations for skilled workers. Their unemployment has only been short-term.

The members of the lower group named ordinary citizens II ("crawling and diving") have clearly had more unstable life situations in this year of 1995. They are still looking for their place in society. After completing school, most of the members of this subgroup have been geared towards working life, only two of the nine have finished vocational school. Before the economical depression some of them really have been employed, but only for short periods and only in occupations for unskilled workers.

The general impression of the whole group named ordinary citizens is that in many ways they seemed to be quite common Finnish young adults. However, some features of marginalisation could be observed in the lower subgroup and therefore some of them could also be called "people in marginalisation risk". It

should be pointed out, that the group called "marginal people" is still a clearly separate group. Moreover, it should to be taken into account that ordinary citizens II mainly consists of subjects from the youngest school leaving cohort, thus it's probable that in the following years many important changes will happen. Much depends on the possible recovery of the Finnish economic climate. In fact, after the second interview the youth unemployment has decreased considerably; especially in southern Finland. For this reason their chances for success in the labour market have markedly improved.

Marginal people

The members of the group named "marginal people" have very difficult family backgrounds (alcoholism, incapacity to work, mother's chronic illness and mother's death and mental illnesses). It is common for all three that the relationship to their parents has been truly complicated. Neither in adolescence nor in young adulthood have they received any support from their parents. That is one reason why they have had to aim for working life and make some money instead of vocational schooling, where they all had been accepted after compulsory school.

Additionally their working careers have been unsuccessful: they have been unemployed several years and before that only working temporarily in unskilled occupations. The clear difference with other groups can be found in the subjects passive attitude about their own influence on their situation. They have hardly any future plans and, therefore, life is lived "day by day".

People with alternative way of life

"The people with alternative ways of life" form quite an interesting group. All these people have some kind of ideology, different than in Finnish society in general, behind their life-style. One is an anarchistic former punk-rocker, the other one has found religion after some drug using years. The third member of group lives quite a restless life; he is a kind of modern lumberjack. He works only so much that he will earn enough to keep himself alive and have some fun. Having a wife and children are not a part of his future plans.

FOUR CASES

Sami,
the portrait of a winner
–it depends on such little things..." –

Sami is the youngest child of white-collar, educated parents. He was transferred to a class for the socially maladjusted (SMA) in the fifth grade. His first years in school had gone relatively well, but after his parents divorced, his school success suffered and he had to repeat the third grade. After the divorce there were problems because of the parents' struggle for custody and because of Sami's poor relationship with his father's new wife and her daughter, who was the same age as Sami. During his school days, Sami lived at different times with both his mother and his father, moving often from one locality to another. Sami has never had actual learning difficulties, however; his transfer to the SMA class was due to anti-social behaviour, including running with a gang and stealing bicycles and mopeds. At the end of elementary school, even transfer to a reformatory was discussed.

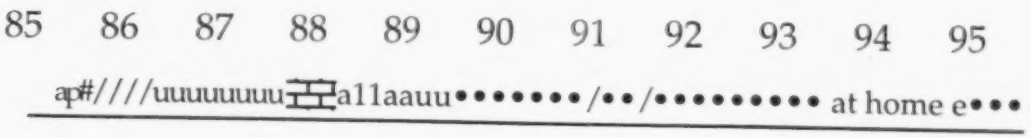

Figure 1. Sami's post-school training/career record from the autumn of 1985 to August 1995

After finishing comprehensive school in 1985, Sami began an apprenticeship, but soon gave up because the field in question, as well as work in general, was not really interesting. The next two years were spent in short-term jobs, usually lasting one or two days, at most a week, and getting into trouble with his friends here and there around the country. Along the way Sami's criminal record became so long that he was put in remand prison in late 1987. Immediately after his release, Sami began his military service, which he completed without cause

for reproach. This successful completion of his military service can be seen as a clear culmination point in his life. Sami has himself described the change by saying that prison showed him the bottom, while the army showed him the other extreme - success. "It depends on such little things..."

As can be seen from the career description (Figure 1), a new phase began in Sami's life after the army. A stable relationship with the opposite sex, which later resulted in marriage, also began at the same time. The significance of his relationship with his wife and his family are central elements in Sami's present value system, and were a central factor in stabilising his life.

From the point of view of his work career, the fact that Sami found an employer through a newspaper ad who did not care about his lack of professional training, but who trained him for a task which fit his personality - aggressive sales work - has great significance. This quick-tongued, energetic young man was granted the title of salesman of the year several times during the beginning of his career. However, this particular firm offered him limited possibilities of advancement, and so Sami tried his luck in another field in 1991. Nevertheless, he returned at the first employer's request as a trainer during the same year. Motivation for this kind of work fell along with the overall buying power of households during the years of recession. Sami took a year off, as he called it, in 1993, during which he began a small business of his own, although he spent most of his time with his family. In 1994 he was offered the position of sales manager in a rapidly-expending chain store. In 1995 he was responsible for several outlets and their personnel, as well as being responsible for the training of new employees. Sami has indeed achieved the white-collar socioeconomic status of his parents, despite a detour on the way, even though he can be considered an underachiever in relation to his background in an educational sense.

Matti, a multi-field entrepreneur

"a seeker"

Matti's parents, who were both entrepreneurs, were divorced during his early childhood. Indeed, Matti himself considers it a problem that he never received any education at home, since he had little contact with his biological father, and his education was largely left to the numerous men his busy, entrepreneur

mother lived with.

Matti was transferred to SMA classes due to concentration difficulties and slightly disruptive behaviour, but he always got by quite well with his academic school work. For this reason Matti's transfer to SMA in the forth grade lasted only one year. However, a cycle of truancy at the beginning of lower secondary school led to Matti being placed in an smaller teaching group again, partly at his own request.

Immediately after comprehensive school Matti got into the line he had applied for, the barber/hairdresser stream in vocational school, but left school a few weeks before graduation. Despite this, he worked in this profession, both as an employee and as an entrepreneur, until 1992. However, he had to give up this line of work in 1993 due to a stress injury, and after one and a half years on unemployment benefits has started working in a completely new field.

Matti's activities in both his working career and his social life can be described as lack of concentration and searching. He has changed jobs frequently, looked for new challenges in both entrepreneurship and in working as a trainer in his own field. However, he has not always been able to stick it out to the end; he completed neither his training nor his military service, he has bought himself a flat, and then spent long periods abroad. During this period, Matti suffered from drug addiction for a few years, but this ended when he experienced a religion awakening. Matti actually devoted himself to preaching the Gospel in 1995, and took jobs paying a commission only in order to support his family (his wife and two-year-old daughter).

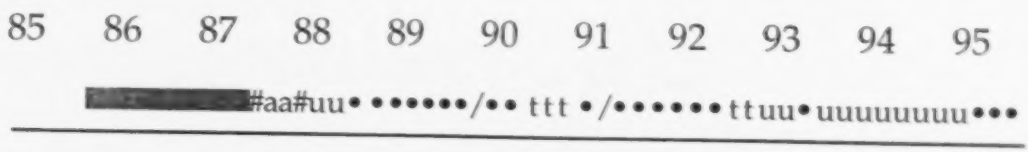

Figure 2. Matti's post-school training/career record from the autumn of 1985 to August 1995

Kari, a skilled worker

"a born and bred truck driver"

Kari is from a traditional working-class family; his parents worked in various floor-level tasks in a factory. No special risk factors can be identified from his family background; Kari's relationship with his parents has always been a warm one, and he lived at home until he was well over 20.

Kari was transferred to SMA teaching in the second grade due to concentration difficulties. According to Kari's own description, "I was so wild". Nevertheless, Kari completed his education without great problems and with a mediocre grade average.

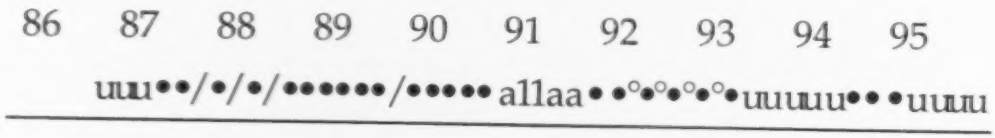

Figure 3. Kari's post-school training/career record from the autumn of 1985 to September 1995

After comprehensive school Kari did not apply for vocational training, but tried to find a job immediately. After a half-year term of unemployment he succeeded in getting work in construction for short periods. However, he has been fascinated by motor vehicles since he was a child, and when the first opportunity presented itself he took a job as a truck driver's helper. When he got his driver's licence he was able to work as a driver in the same firm. Kari has been working for the same company for several years, even though his career was broken by military service and later lay-offs and longer periods of unemployment.

The recession had a great effect on the transport industry, which initially meant short-term lay-offs. Kari's career is characterised by a period of a little more than a year between 1991 and early 1993 when he took part in a "one week on-one week off" system with the other drivers. In 1993, however, he was unemployed for about ten months, after which he was again working for half a year, then again unemployed since the autumn of 1994. Kari has had quite good luck with his livelihood, however; he joined the union as soon as it was possible and has

therefore received an income-adjusted allowance, which is completely sufficient to cover the normal expenses of a single man.

Kari has a strong professional grounding in his field, supplemented by a trailer licence which he got while in the army, so that he saw the future after the recession has passed in quite a positive light. At the time of the interview in 1995 the situation in the transport field was looking better, and Kari had been offered work as a fill-in for those on summer holiday at least for the summer season. As one possible future step, Kari had envisioned getting further training as a driver of so-called dangerous substances.

Mari

"life in marginal"

Mari's parents have not divorced, but the family had a lot of other difficulties. Father was an alcoholic and mother hysteric, over-religious person. Mari's older brother from father's first marriage have mild psychic and physical disorders.

Mari was transferred to EBD classes at fifth grade after she had to steal money and food from school. After that she has also been living in a children's home because her parents were considered to be not able to take care of her.

At school and with academic studies Mari have not had any real difficulties. She has not any learning disabilities and she has got above average grades in all school subjects. Mari has also very warm and positive experiences of the time at special classes. Especially one female special teacher at the last years of comprehensive schooling was very important person for her. Mari told that she had many times wished that her mother could be like that teacher.

After comprehensive school Mari wanted to enter to senior secondary school, but she didn't do that, althought she would be accepted. The reason was that she has been expelled from the children's home and she had to move back by her parents. She didn't expect any help from her parents and decided to try to find some work for earning her living. In first years after schools he were able to find some short-term unskilled jobs, but after the recession has begun, she has been unemployed most of the time.

Over these postschool years Mari has been living with couple of men, but these relationships has been quite unsatisfactory and violent. Mari has also had serious drinking periods herself and she was in very poor condition at the time of the

second interview.

Mari's lifecourse tells us that the poor bacground has very clear effect to the postschool adjustment. Althought she was quite good student at school and she had good relationship to her special teacher these things had hardly any long-term effects. In Finnish school system the ITP's are not in general use and it seems that this story could be one of the way to prove that the need for special provision doesn't end when our pupils get their comprehensive school diplomas at the age of 16.

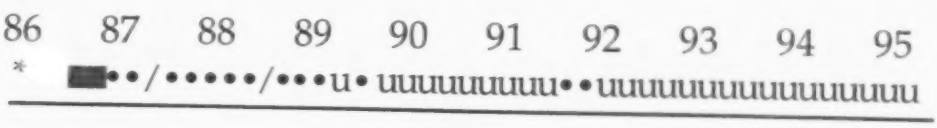

Figure 4. Mari's post-school training/career record from the autumn of 1986 to September 1995

DISCUSSION

The primary finding of this study is that the only direction away from special classes and from "the shadow of the school" (Kivirauma, 1995) is not towards "the road to nowhere". In fact, it seems that the majority have managed quite well or at least around an average level. It would also seem that the most important issue affecting post school adjustment is not the special education placement itself but the backgrounds of these special pupils.

The effect of cultural capital is already a well-known and well-documented phenomenon within the larger population (in Finland e.g. Kivinen & Rinne, 1995), yet it is interesting that the same structure – the effect of family background – also lies behind the post school adjustment of a subgroup of former maladjusted school pupils. The big question is if there really exist any institutional (e.g. educational or sociopolitical) interventions which could aid in breaking this kind of determinism. According to this study, it is obvious, that for lives which are overloaded with risk factors, the vicious circle from

disadvantaged childhood to disadvantaged adulthood is still hard to break – even with some help from special education.

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Appendix 1. Symbols used in life-course graphics

Family and Living

2 = with both parents

1 = with mother

X = moving town to town

/ = moving inside a town

= living indipendently

dd= dating relationship

co = cohabiting

= end of a relationship

C = first child is born

Education and Work

= regular education

= special class (EBD)

=hospital school (child psychiatric)

V = school change

Ⓡ = doubling the grade

± = did apply, but weren't accepted to further education

* = did apply, were accepted, but didn't begin further education

=vocational school

= dropped-out of further ed.

ap = apprenticeship

u = unemployed (2 months)

• = employed (2 months)

UUU = relief work (6 months)

m = living with mothernity grant

a11aa = army (11 months)

= in prison